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AUTHOR	Finley, Sandra J.
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ABSTRACT

This document is a product of the Promoting Instructional Coherence Project. The paper describes the progress of education in Louisiana and is designed to help educators as they construct a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning. Louisiana typically ranks near the bottom of the 50 states on educational quality and effectiveness, and its educational leaders are implementing reforms that focus on the entire educational system to ensure that change takes place in an integrated way. The paper explores how the state's economic realities and its political agenda contribute to educational reform. New ideas from the national education reform movement, such as high academic standards, systemic improvement, equity, and new approaches to teaching and learning, as well as the availability of federal money to support systemic reform, are critical in helping Louisiana focus on educational improvement. Unifying themes, such as "instructional coherence," that describe the relationship among curriculum, instruction, assessment, external mandates, and community context can aid the reform movement. Additionally, higher teacher salaries and better professional development of teachers are two important components for improvement of educational standards. Standardized testing, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, will be used to link accountability and assessment to school improvement. Contains 14 references. (RJM)

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The Progress of Education

in Louisiana

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SEDL
Southwest Educational
Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh Street
Austin, Texas 78701
(512) 476-6861

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The Progress of Education in Louisiana

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Sandra J. Finley, Ph.D.

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

April, 1999

To make schools more effective and efficient, many school reforms and changes have been introduced at the national, state, and local levels. Teachers who are making decisions about what and how to teach their students in this new context have more to consider—new policies, new ideas about education, and a multitude of new programs. The new ideas may be unclear, inconsistent, or contradictory. For schooling to improve as a result of these reforms, teachers must be able to make sense of the reform ideas, bring them together in a meaningful way, and construct a coherent practice.

"Instructional coherence" describes the relationship among curriculum, instruction, assessment, external mandates, and community context that teachers create and communicate to their students. In creating a coherent practice, the teacher intentionally brings these together with a focus on student learning to provide educational experiences that are clear, connected to each other, and worthwhile. SEDL is currently researching the problems teachers face in making their practices more coherent. This paper describes the progress of education in Louisiana. The view is that of the author, drawn from documents and interviews.

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Education Becomes a Top Priority

Education is Louisiana's top priority today! There is excitement, energy, and hope about education in Louisiana, a state traditionally ranked near the bottom of the 50 states on educational quality and effectiveness. This state is also near the bottom on measures of the wealth and health of its citizens, but a turnaround is underway. Historically, one common perception of Louisiana has been that of a state defined by opposites which often fall along racial and socioeconomic lines: those who send their children to private schools and those who cannot; those who are powerful and those who are not; those who have professional careers and those who have jobs in agriculture, the service sector, or the oil industry. Today, however, people from these diverse groups are working together to improve education by facing the challenges, barriers, and inertia head-on.

Educational leaders in Louisiana are taking an approach to reform that focuses on the entire educational system to ensure that change takes place in an integrated way, rather than progressing in a piecemeal fashion. They are looking to the national reform movement for guidance and support in improving the quality of education for all students in the state. Teaching in Louisiana is expected to improve as teachers are given more resources, responsibilities, and opportunities to learn new skills. Students should have improved educational experiences as problems throughout the system are addressed. Let's look at how the story of education in Louisiana unfolds.

Economic Realities Lead to Support for Educational Reform

Economic realities have helped mobilize the general public to support educational reform in Louisiana. The oil and gas industry plays a pivotal role in the state. Louisiana is the third largest U.S. producer of oil and natural gas and is a center of petroleum refining and petrochemical manufacturing. During the oil boom of the 1970s and early 1980s, oil and gas accounted for 30 to 41 percent of the state's revenue, adding $1.6 billion to state coffers in 1981-82. Times were good; there was little incentive for the state to diversify its industrial base. However, what was good for the state economy was not necessarily good for public education. The ready availability of well-paying, low-skill roughneck jobs in the oil patch reduced the incentive for many students to complete high school. This attitude is often blamed for the state's high illiteracy rate, low national test scores, and low graduation rate (5). Those who controlled the purse strings share a similar attitude toward investment in education; spending for schools and teacher salaries in Louisiana was ranked lower than nearly all of the 50 states. The oil industry has thus been described as having a "profound impact on attitudes [of policymakers,

voters, and students] toward education" (5, p. 4).

This history of low funding for public education has also been attributed to the high rate of private and parochial school attendance among the state's affluent and nonminority students. Many middle- and upper-class families, including state decision makers, have traditionally sent their children to these schools—it is a way of life in Louisiana—and thus, had relatively little interest in increasing financial support for public schools (7). Another factor contributing to the traditionally low rate of spending on education may be the large rural population in the state, which is said to be leery of change in general and to have had a limited interest in pursuing educational change.

During the mid-1980s, oil prices declined. Oil companies reduced their exploration and drilling activity and laid off workers. An economic crisis resulted—high unemployment coupled with a poorly educated workforce. The state's income from oil and gas plummeted and has never recovered to boom levels. [In 1997, oil and gas revenues contributed only 12% or $723 million of total state revenues.] This situation changed the public view of education, as many people realized that diversifying the state's economic base was critical and that "a well-trained work force [was] the key to attracting and maintaining new industry" (5, p. 5). Writing in 1990 about the impact of this shift in attitude, education leaders said, "change became inevitable—not merely tolerated, but demanded . . . . The changing mood of the last decade, driven by a deep economic crisis, has now created a consensus that compels reform" (5, p. 5). The challenge was to find ways to put more money into education—to go against the low priority placed on school funding (1).

There was a general economic upturn in the country during the mid-1990s. Louisiana reported increases in available jobs in most sectors, with decreased reliance on oil and gas. Unemployment dropped from 13.1 percent in 1986 to 6.9 percent in 1995. The oil industry stabilized, but at a lower production level and with fewer high-wage, low-skill jobs (10).

Table 1
Louisiana Population and Number of Schools

State population (1996) [a]		**4,350,579**
	Percentage African-American	31.6
	Percentage Hispanic	2.4
No. of school districts [b]		**66**
No. of public schools [b]		**1,459**
	Percentage urban	32
	Percentage suburban and large town	19
	Percentage rural and small town	49
No. of public school students (1995-96) [a]		**767,796**
No. of private school students (12.1%) [b]		**105,688**
Per pupil spending (1996) [b]		**$4,194**
	U.S. average [b]	$5,541
	Louisiana rank [b]	45th

a. Data from *State of the State 1997*, Louisiana Office of Planning and Budget.
b. Data from *Quality Counts 1997, Education Week*

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Despite the overall gains, Louisiana still has one of the highest percentages of persons living in poverty in the nation (19.7% for all persons and 31.0% for children in 1995 [7, 10]). Related measures—the general health of the population, rate of violent crime, infant mortality rate, and child well-being—add to the picture of a state facing problems on many fronts (6). Improving education is seen as a way to change that picture.

Education visionaries are beginning to convince citizens and policy makers to improve the quality of education in the state by spending more money on education. Economic realities have helped enlist the support of the general public for reform, but questions persist. What kinds of improvements should be made to the educational system? How much will it cost? Where will the money come from? As elsewhere, these are hot topics in Louisiana.

The Political Agenda Pushes Educational Reform

In Louisiana, stories of power struggles between the governor, legislature, state superintendent, state boards of education, and teacher unions are common. A 1988 report on reform in Louisiana concluded that, "Those who tried to change the system have time and again seen reform measures watered down, ignored, not properly implemented, taken to court by teacher unions, repealed, mired down in turf battles and power struggles between public bodies, or not funded" (3). This is changing as education leaders in the state come together to solve the substantial problems facing Louisiana education. Each successive governor has had his own approach to educational issues, setting the tone for legislation. Mike Foster, who took office in 1996, brought education to the forefront. His agenda reflects national trends and includes setting high academic standards, developing appropriate assessments, establishing greater school accountability, increasing staff development time, turning more control over to districts and holding them accountable for results, making the charter-school law less restrictive, and providing better preparation for children to start school.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) has eight elected members and three members appointed by the governor. BESE supervises and controls the public elementary, secondary, vocational, and special schools and has budgetary responsibility for all state-appropriated school funds for K-12 schools. In July 1999, control of vocational schools will be transferred from BESE to the Board of Regents (BoR), which has responsibility for higher education in the state. Prior to 1987, the state superintendent of education was an elected official whose political position on education was often at odds with those of BESE members. In 1987, Louisianans voted to change the superintendency to an appointed position, thus reducing some of the political tension between BESE and the superintendent. A former state senator and chairman of the Senate Education Committee, Cecil J. Picard, was appointed superintendent by BESE in 1996. He heads the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE) and is responsible for carrying out BESE policies and laws affecting the public schools.

Today, there is the sense that the governor, superintendent, legislators, and board members are all on the same page, moving in the same direction, to get Louisiana out of the basement with regard to educational quality (7). Their commitment reflects the recent history of educational reform in Louisiana that began with collaboration to acquire federal grants and continues with a systemic approach to improving education.

Educational Reform Initiatives in Louisiana

Changes in Louisiana's economics pushed the state to make education a priority. New ideas from the national education reform movement were also critical—high academic standards, systemic improvement, equity, and new approaches to teaching and learning—in helping Louisiana focus on a number of improvement goals. The availability of federal money to support systemic reform brought many leaders together to develop proposals. Kerry Davidson, the deputy commissioner for sponsored programs for the Board of Regents, has been very successful in establishing and maintaining a climate of collaboration, emphasizing a systemic approach to reform, and acquiring federal grants for improving education in the state.

Table 2.
Guide to Educational Leaders, Agencies, and Reform Initiatives

Governor	Mike Foster, Republican, elected 1996
Superintendent	Cecil J. Picard
BESE	State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Glenny Lee Buquet, president
BoR	State Board of Regents, Mary Ellen Sanders, chairperson
LDE	Louisiana Department of Education
LaSIP	Louisiana Systemic Initiatives Project (National Science Foundation-funded Statewide Systemic Initiatives Program), Kerry Davidson, project director
LaCEPT	Louisiana Collaborative for Excellence in the Preparation of Teachers (NSF-funded project), Kerry Davidson, project director
LEARN	Louisiana LEARN for the 21st Century (Louisiana Education Achievement and Results Now), Gary Nesbitt, chairperson
LEQSF	Louisiana Education Quality Support Fund, a fund for education established with money from an oil settlement with the U.S. government
Goals 2000 Initiative	Grant from U.S. Dept. of Ed. to assist state in meeting National Education Goals, overseen by bipartisan commission
Technology Challenge Grant	Collaborative Project, includes Louisiana Networking Infrastructure for Education (LaNIE), Goals 2000/LEARN, NSF Kerry Davidson, project director

Louisiana Develops a Vision of Good Practice

In 1979, the legislature voiced the state's vision of good practice with the passage of Act 750, the Louisiana Competency-Based Education Program. Act 750 required LDE to develop state curriculum guides in the core subjects that listed minimum skills and competencies, instructional activities and materials, and minimum instructional time. The legislature also required assessment to be linked with the competencies (1).

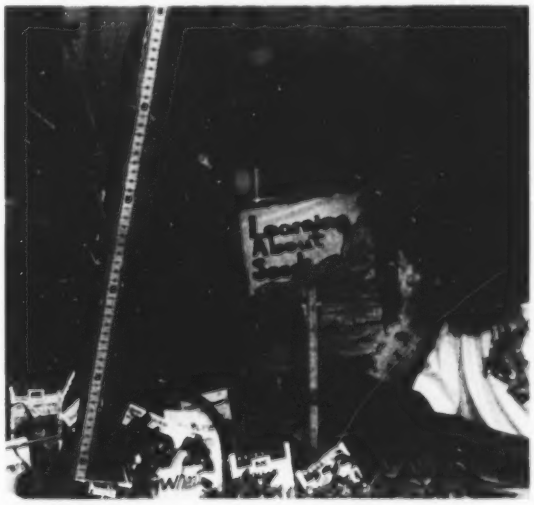
LDE established advisory and writing committees that included classroom teachers to develop curriculum guides. The guides, which were revised periodically, were handed to local districts as the state curriculum. They were directive, providing little encouragement or help for teachers to improve classroom teaching. Then in the mid-1980s, the national movement to develop academic standards started with the work by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). Across the country, educators were taking a close look at drafts of these national mathematics standards and, later, at those for science from the National Research Council. Many educators in Louisiana reviewed the drafts and realized that Louisiana's guidelines were not as academically rigorous as those from the national groups. Standards being drafted by NCTM, for example, emphasized critical thinking, problem solving, and communication, whereas most math teachers in Louisiana and in other states taught computation.

Money Is Dedicated to Educational Reform

New money became available for education reform in 1986 when the state established a fund with $550 million received in an oil settlement with the federal government. A constitutional amendment dedicated the interest proceeds from the fund (1997 fund value, $760 million) to the Louisiana Education Quality Support Fund (LEQSF), to be administered by BESE and BoR (4). This was significant because it created a substantial source of discretionary funds for education, money that could be used for trying new things. For example, $33.9 million from the LEQSF was spent on K-12 materials and programs in 1995-96 (10).

The Availability of Federal Dollars Leads to Statewide Collaboration

Additionally, new money became available through federal initiatives to improve education. Louisiana has been "very successful in attracting federal dollars for systemic education reform" (1, p. 4). A collaborative spirit of reform began with the development of the Louisiana Systemic Initiatives Program (LaSIP) proposal to the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Statewide Systemic Initiatives Program (SSI). LaSIP received $10 million from NSF for a five-year statewide effort to reform classroom



mathematics and science in 1991, the first year of the SSI awards. The state supported the effort with an additional $10 million—$5 million from BoR and $5 million from the BESE LEQSF. LaSIP was chartered as an independent state agency funded by the consortium of NSF, BoR, and BESE, with its existence tied to continued funding by NSF.

Other federal dollars were secured for improvement of teacher education, development of curriculum frameworks, application of technology, and attention to urban schools. LaSIP took a lead role in fostering cooperation between the various agencies and was able to avoid turf wars and keep the reform efforts on track (1). Appropriate resources were sought and strategies identified for improving each piece of the educational system. The efforts were not considered in isolation, however, as connections between the pieces were recognized and used to foster a systemic approach to reform.

LaSIP actively sought the support of key people at the state level. The funds available to LaSIP were small compared to the Louisiana's K–12 education budget, so LaSIP could not expect to change things on its own. It has been a challenge for LaSIP to accomplish its goals. The metaphor in the following description is apt.

> One state official compares LaSIP to a sleek racehorse blazing a trail of reform, while the state educational bureaucracy is full of workhorses still burdened by the old system and long-established habits. . . . the workhorses cannot keep up with the racehorses (nor is it easy to teach an old horse new tricks), and the racehorses, while fast, are not strong enough to pull the whole system forward with them. (1, pp. 31-32)

LaSIP brought a new vision of classroom teaching and learning in science and mathematics to educators in the state, a vision derived from the national conversation about educational reform. LaSIP connected Louisiana's education reform to the national reform agenda. This connection worked in both directions; not only did educators within Louisiana become fluent with reform ideas, but leaders around the country began to take notice of Louisiana's strong collaborative approach, as well. Across the country, reform organizations like LaSIP were urging teachers to change their instructional strategies to better benefit student learning. Of course, they had to do more than "urge" teachers, they had to provide training and support so teachers would have the knowledge, skills, and desire to change their practices.

LaSIP Promotes New Ideas about Classroom Teaching and Learning

The mission of LaSIP, which was funded for a second five-year period in 1996, is to "achieve pervasive and enduring standards-based reform of mathematics and science education in Louisiana in light of the increasingly rapid changes required to prepare students for productive life in the 21st century" (4).

Approximately 70 percent of LaSIP resources are directed toward professional development programs for mathematics and science teachers to retrain them in the teaching approaches advocated in the national standards. The new methods represent a clear change from the way classes are taught in most schools in Louisiana, and indeed, in the nation.

> Rote memorization of facts and formulas, along with mundane paper-and-pencil procedures, will be replaced with a student-centered approach to critical thinking and problem solving, leading to a much broader understanding of the uses of mathematics and science in today's technological age. (5, p. 9, LaSIP's statement on teaching and learning)

LaSIP found that a major, long-term effort is required to change teaching. More than 6,000 teachers have been trained by LaSIP. A case study of LaSIP from 1991 through 1996 found that these teachers were, at that time, more likely to use student-centered teaching approaches and multiple student assessments in their classrooms, but most need more time and practice to incorporate the changes fully into their teaching (1). LaSIP teachers were more aware of reforms and willing to try new things. However, the reform ideas do not appear to have traveled by osmosis to untrained teachers, nor are many teachers in any one school trained, so LaSIP teachers are fairly isolated (1). It is difficult for them to construct a coherent practice based on new reform ideas without support from school administrators and opportunities to collaborate with trained colleagues. School leaders were not originally targeted for training, but LDE and LaSIP have begun to address this by offering leadership courses taught by LaSIP staff. As more administrators embrace the new ideas, it is likely that they will encourage and provide for more teachers to get the professional development necessary to learn new approaches. Also, more teachers are now receiving training offered through LDE and thus the difference between teaching approaches of LaSIP teachers and others is, in many cases, narrowing.

LaSIP has created a climate for educational reform in the state that extends beyond the work of individual teachers. For example, new approaches to assessment that are consistent with LaSIP's reform agenda have been incorporated into the revised state criterion-referenced tests, the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century (LEAP 21). Fourth-grade students in mathematics are now expected to solve real-world problems, accurately use calculators, understand fractions, construct written responses to problems, justify answers and solution processes. LaSIP has held staff development workshops across the state promoting instructional approaches that enable students to accomplish these complex tasks. Louisiana has taken the plunge in expecting its students to do more than add, subtract, multiply, and divide or to memorize a list of definitions.

The State Develops Frameworks and Standards

In 1993, LDE applied for and received a three-year $900,000 federal grant to develop mathematics and science curriculum frameworks. The project was a collaboration between LDE and LaSIP to "to create state mathematics and science curricula that represent present and emerging world class standards in mathematics and science curricula and assessment" (8, p. 2). LaSIP had already begun the work of developing standards for mathematics and science, but

the new funds and collaboration with LDE extended their capacity to successfully complete the project. At the same time, a Goals 2000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education enabled a commission to begin work on a state improvement plan addressing the National Education Goals and provided funding for the reform efforts of local districts.

The frameworks for mathematics and science, which include standards, were completed in 1996, following an extensive review process throughout the state. LDE then focused on developing standards in the other core subjects. These were written for English language arts, social studies, foreign languages, and the arts, with considerable input from teachers around the state. National standards served as models, and the state called on out-of-state experts for advice and review. The guidebooks that accompany the standards include stories of reform strategies and results from several states, showing teachers in Louisiana that they are not alone in these efforts.

The next step, currently under way, is for local districts to develop curricula that reflect the state standards and the priorities of the district. There is concern that "the level of content expertise and leadership at the local level is often not strong enough" to successfully accomplish this task (1, p. 3). A LaSIP educator reported, however, that districts are generally finding that bringing teachers together to do the work is the key to success. For participating teachers, this process breaks down their traditional isolation, and they share their understandings of teaching and learning. Teachers must *make sense* of the various mandates in order to understand and use new state policies and local priorities to create coherent curricula for their districts and students.

Like LaSIP, LDE supports the efforts of local districts and teachers through training workshops and printed materials. "There are signs that LDE now views its mission as including support, technical assistance, cooperation, and leadership" (1, p. 3). LDE's *Resource Guide for Curriculum Development* provides information and guidance for local educators on the process of standards-based curriculum planning and implementation. Resource guides have also been developed for the specific subject areas. The guide for mathematics, for example, includes curriculum models that are consistent with the mathematics standards, descriptions of instructional strategies for teaching mathematics, lists of resources, and so on. The development of capacity in local school districts to create and implement local standards-based curricula is critical, especially in light of new standards-based assessments and accountability, to be discussed later.

Reform Requires Changes in Teacher Preparation

The collaborative spirit of reform was further advanced when Louisiana received a five-year $4 million award from NSF in 1993 to establish the Louisiana Collaborative for Excellence in the Preparation of Teachers (LaCEPT). Again, the state added funds ($500,000 per year) from the EEQSE. LaCEPT seeks to reform teacher training programs so new mathematics and science teachers will be well prepared in both

content and pedagogy (1). LaCEPT is an integral part of LaSIP, and is directed from the same office, thus increasing the likelihood of connections among these reform efforts.

LaCEPT provides money for colleges to revise mathematics and science teacher training to reflect national standards. Collaboration between education, mathematics, and science professors, college administrators, and local school people is encouraged. College faculty can also become more involved in K–12 education reform by working with LaSIP summer projects. LaSIP and LaCEPT have professionalized teaching, as evidenced by the increasing number of teachers in the state who belong to professional teaching organizations, present at conferences, seek external funding sources, and attend professional development events (1).

Louisiana Increases Availability of Technology for Schools

Most schools in Louisiana, including two-year colleges, currently do not have access to the kind of technology that will help students become competitive in an information-driven marketplace. The state technology plan addresses this problem and helps ensure that all students become technologically literate. The Louisiana Networking Infrastructure for Education (LaNIE) is a joint plan of the Goals 2000 initiative, BESE, Louisiana Public Broadcasting, and LaSIP. Five pilot sites were funded to develop models for integrating Internet resources with K–14 instruction. Each site involves collaboration between university faculty, district and school administrators, and classroom teachers. LaNIE incorporates access to technology with training for teachers, assistance with curricular integration, and ongoing technical support.

The Foster administration appropriated $38 million in 1997-98 and $25 million in 1998-99 for classroom-based technology—hardware, software, and equipment including modems and scanners. A Technology Challenge Grant from the U.S. Department of Education for $10 million extended the original LaNIE effort to underserved populations in the state. The push for technology education is based on the belief that "Louisiana's long-term social and economic prosperity depends on it" (14). As in all of the reform efforts, there is the theme of bringing Louisiana into the 21st century.

Putting It All Together

The state has been working on many fronts. The reform projects and LDE have addressed teaching practice, frameworks and standards, teacher training and preparation, and technology. Ongoing work on such key policies as school funding and teacher salaries, accountability and assessment, and teacher certification and evaluation, has been influenced by these reforms over the past 15 years. To consolidate the reform efforts, LDE and the Office of the Governor began formal development of a state education plan in 1994 with the support of a Goals 2000: Educate America Act grant. The bipartisan Goals 2000 Committee developed the first drafts of a plan. At the end of its term, the committee was replaced by the LEARN Commission, whose members were selected by the governor and state superintendent.

Based on the groundwork laid by the Goals 2000 Committee, the commission developed the Louisiana LEARN for the 21st Century (Louisiana Education Achievement and Results Now), a comprehensive and ambitious plan that pulls together the state reform efforts and state goals. LEARN subsumes all existing state education initiatives under its umbrella and has one overarching goal: "that all students who exit schools in Louisiana will be knowledgeable, self-reliant, and productive citizens in the 21st century" (1, p. 9). The plan's 11 objectives are "intended to accelerate the trend toward increased local control and increased accountability for results" (1, p. 9).

The commission solicited public input on the state plan through telephone interviews, focus groups, television programs, and mailings. The plan was submitted to BESE and approved in concept in 1996. LEARN is a strategic plan that details the state goals, core beliefs, objectives, and strategies, as well as specifying who is responsible for implementing each strategy. The plan is complemented by a competitive subgrant program that supports local improvement, professional development, and preservice reform efforts. Approximately $14 million in LEARN funds were awarded to local systems by 1997. Of Louisiana's 66 school systems, 59 had been conducting LEARN subgrant projects, including 770 individual teacher projects (10). The LEARN Commission's influence has prompted the Legislature to support the LEARN plan by passing new education policies, including those on funding, teacher evaluation, assessment, and accountability, to be discussed below.

Objectives for Louisiana LEARN for the 21st Century:

- **Louisiana will establish high academic standards and administer appropriate assessments.**
- **Schools and districts will be held accountable for student achievement.**
- **Districts and schools will have greater control over decision making.**
- **Resources and funding will be used more effectively.**
- **Parents and students will help ensure that student learning occurs.**
- **Teachers and learners will have access to and effectively use technology.**
- **Schools will be safe, drug- and violence-free, disciplined environments.**
- **Professional growth and development opportunities will be available.**
- **Parent and community partnerships will be encouraged.**
- **Children should start school with the skills to be successful learners.**
- **Students will be encouraged to explore career and educational choices. (6)**

Changes in Critical Policies

Building on the collaborative climate, the linkage to new visions of teaching and learning, and the recognition of the need to consider all parts of the system, the state has made changes in major statewide educational policies. The policies that have the most far-reaching implications at this time include those addressing school funding, teacher salaries, teacher evaluation, student assessment, and school accountability. The legislative or board policy action often requires local implementation to move the reform forward.

Moving toward Equitable School Funding and Higher Teacher Salaries

The inequity of funding for education in different districts has been cause for concern in Louisiana as in other states. School funding comes from federal, state, and local sources. Disparities arise because the local contribution depends on the local tax base; poor districts lack the tax base to generate adequate money for schools. Paralleling similar events around the country, BESE and the legislature were sued in 1991 by a coalition of districts and parents alleging the state funds to local districts were inequitable and inadequate. The lawsuit was dismissed by a state appeals court in 1997, remanded by the state supreme court for clarification, and then dismissed for a second time in 1998. The plaintiffs are taking the case back to the state supreme court for a final ruling.

BESE has revised the state school funding formula to gradually equalize funding (6). The Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) sets the state appropriation formula. The formula has, in the past, been based on the number of teachers allotted and employed, or, later, on the number of students enrolled in a district. The current revised MFP formula provides a specific funding amount for each student *based on local needs*. Changes in state funding were phased in. In 1992-93, the MFP formula implementation level was 20 percent *of new funds* owed to school systems. [Simply put, the allocation for a district was calculated using the old funding formula and the new funding formula. The difference between the two is the amount of new money owed to a district.] In 1993-94, the implementation level increased to 25 percent and remained unchanged until 1996.

With a new administration and increases in state revenues, the 1996 legislature provided $109.4 million to "jump-start the funding" for MFP (7, p. 118), with commitment to fund at 100 percent by 1999-2000. School systems can now count on these new funds as they make their plans. The legislature is making "funding for public education a high priority, providing more than $330 million in new funding during the past two years" (9, p. 1). The state sent about $2 billion to local districts in 1998, double the amount of just 10 years ago. This is average for Southern states (9). Louisiana receives more in federal funds than the Southern average, but local funding is less than the average. The state has taken additional measures, as we shall see, to link school funding to accountability, recognizing that previous inequities in educational funding have created districts in desperate need of help. The new systems of funding and accountability are anticipated to work together to ensure that new state money goes to help those districts that need it most.

Low teacher salaries have been a concern throughout the Southern region. In Louisiana, much of the additional state spending has gone to teacher salaries, which were increased in 1996, and then again in 1997 and 1998. In a national comparison, Louisiana teachers received the highest average salary increase in the country (5.8%) during the 1996-97 year (13), although salaries still rank 48th in a national comparison. With the increases in salaries came new demands and expectations—to work longer hours, to attend more trainings, to be part of curriculum development teams, to change teaching methods, and to be held accountable for student performance.

Rethinking Teacher Evaluation

Teacher evaluation has been an emotional issue in Louisiana for the past decade. The governor's Children First Act, passed in 1988, included a teacher evaluation plan that required all teachers to be evaluated and recertified every three years by the state. Teachers had to demonstrate competency on 91 indicators, and evaluation by the state was linked to certification (2). Following an outcry by teachers unions who said the plan was "punitive, unworkable, and focused too heavily on getting rid of poor teachers instead of trying to improve their skills," the plan was suspended in 1991 (12). Under a revised plan,

Table 3
School Spending

K–12 expenditures (1995-96) [a]		**$3.397 billion**
	Federal contrubution [b]	12.3%
	State contribution [b]	50.9%
	Local contribution [b]	36.8%
Per pupil spending (1994-95) [a]		**$4,194**
Average teacher salary (1996-97) [c]		**$28,347**
	U.S. average [c]	$38,436
	Louisiana rank [c]	48th

a. Data from *Quality Counts 1997, Education Week.*
b. Data from *State of the State 1997,* Louisiana Office of Planning and Budget.
c. Data from Schneider & Nelson, 1998.

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passed in 1994, beginning teachers are evaluated by the state through the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program. A new teacher entering service for the first time in a Louisiana public school is provided assistance (mentoring and professional development) and is assessed on his or her competence on the Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching in order to structure improvement activities and to make decisions about certification. New teachers may remain in the program for up to two years, at which time the teacher is either certified or suspended. Currently licensed teachers are evaluated by their district. The lifetime certification for teachers was preserved in the new bill (12).

Linking Accountability and Assessment to School Improvement

The new accountability system is being phased in over the next several years. It requires every school and district to develop a school improvement plan, identify the lowest achieving schools in the district, and make provisions for assistance to those schools (7).

> The proposed accountability system is intended to drive fundamental changes in classroom teaching by helping schools and communities focus on improved student achievement. The system is designed to encourage and support school improvement by
>
> - Clearly establishing the state's goals for schools and students;
> - Creating an easy way to communicate to schools and the public how well a school is performing;
> - Recognizing schools for their effectiveness in demonstrating growth in student achievement; and
> - Focusing attention, energy, and resources on those schools that need help improving student achievement. (9, p. 1)

Under the new system, school performance grades (0 to 100+) will be calculated according to a formula that assigns varying weights to four indicators of student achievement: criterion-referenced tests (60%), norm-referenced tests (30%), attendance (10% for K-6, 5% for 7-12), and dropout (5% for 7-12). A score of 100 indicates the school has reached the state's ten-year goal. Growth targets will be calculated for each school, indicating how much the school is expected to improve in a two-year interval. The actual performance

grade will then be compared to the growth target, and schools will be labeled according to the relationship between the two. Monetary rewards will be given to schools that meet or exceed their growth targets; technical support and resources will be provided for schools that do not (9).

Students in Louisiana had a high passing rate on the state LEAP test and a low passing rate on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), leading the legislature to conclude that the state test is too easy and gives an inflated picture of what students know and can do. New state criterion-referenced tests, the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century (LEAP 21), are being designed to reflect the new state standards, to have more *kinds* of questions (multiple choice, constructed response, and open-ended questions), and to require students to use more complex thinking skills. The tests will be similar to the NAEP test in that they will have five performance levels—advanced, proficient, basic (on-grade level), approaching basic, and unsatisfactory. They will include science and social studies for the first time. Passage of a graduate exit exam continues to be required for a state-endorsed diploma (1, 9).

Louisiana students took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), a norm-referenced test, for the first time in spring, 1998. Prior to 1998, Louisiana used the less-difficult California Achievement Test. Students will now take a standardized test nearly every year. Because of the changes in assessment, teachers are critically examining their curriculum to make sure their classroom instruction is aligned with the test content. Administrators and teachers are predictably nervous about how their students will do and about what will happen if students do poorly.

Table 4
Louisiana Student Achievement Scores

LEAP: Percentage of students at or above state standards		
1996	**Language Arts**	**Math**
3rd grade	90	89
5th grade	87	89
7th grade	87	79
HS Exit	86	77

NAEP: Percentage of students attaining mathematics achievement levels		
1996	**4th grade**	**8th grade**
Below basic	56	62
Basic	36	31
Proficient	8	7
Advanced	0	0

Data from *State of the State 1997*, Louisiana Office of Planning and Budget

Table 5
Louisiana Standardized Testing Schedule by Grade

Grade	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Test	ITBS	LEAP 21	ITBS	ITBS	ITBS	LEAP 21	ITBS	LEAP 21	LEAP 21

ITBS—national norm-referenced test
LEAP 21—the new state criterion-referenced test

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Conclusion

Louisiana is taking the improvement of education seriously. Historically, education has been a low priority in this state, but this is changing. State leaders have rallied to reverse the widespread reluctance to adequately fund education, increasing state support of education and adding provisions to address funding inequities across districts. The state's economy is improving and with it comes access to additional money, which the state has earmarked for education and used to leverage even more federal funds

There is concern in some camps that improvement in student achievement is not coming fast enough. The president of the Council for a Better Louisiana warned that there is still a "critical need to focus on student achievement and school performance" (11). Graduation rates and test scores have not improved very much over the past decade. For example, from 1990 to 1996, the percentage of eighth graders scoring at or above the basic level on the NAEP math test increased six points, but Louisiana students still rank next to last when compared to those in other states (7). A BESE member was reported as saying that school improvement in Louisiana requires provision of enough money to provide a "minimum education" for all students, implementation of the school accountability plan, and improvement in teacher pay and training. "It's a three-pronged attack. If you leave any one of those out, you're not going to make it" (11).

Teachers in Louisiana have been among the poorest paid in the country. Improving teacher salaries is key to improving education in the state, and salaries are getting closer to the regional average with the pay raises that have come out of the past three legislative sessions. This should raise morale among the state's teachers and, over time, lead to an increase in the number of new teachers entering the profession in Louisiana.

The state is taking a very close look at teacher learning. LaSIP believes in the importance of focusing attention on professional development, and LDE has a new division charged with providing better access to training for teachers across the state. LaSIP and LDE are shifting some of their attention to garnering the support of the administrators who control access to professional development opportunities for teachers. They are also making plans to develop cadres of trained teachers within individual schools and districts. These actions should help ensure that teachers can get the training and support they need to provide quality instruction for students.

A LaSIP evaluation report states that "lack of capacity appears to be Louisiana's most significant barrier to reform" (1, p. 32). Teachers and administrators do not appear to have the experiences necessary to cope with all of the new expectations and responsibilities. They will have to adapt to a number of significant changes in a short time. They are being held accountable for their students' achievement on new, more stringent tests, but they are assured more local control, including local teacher evaluation, and more consistent state funds. So, the state is both transferring control to the local districts *and* providing guidance through training, technical assistance, and guidebooks.

This paper began with the idea that the education story in Louisiana is infused with excitement, energy, and hope. It is a complex story. The improvement of a system that begins the reform effort ranked near the bottom is, to put it bluntly, hard work. With all the

excitement comes the realization that there is a lot of work ahead—for teachers, administrators, policy makers, and students. With all the energy that some people bring to the process comes the knowledge that it takes more—more money, more support, more risk-taking, more people committed to the reform efforts, more good ideas, more perseverance. The early successes have provided a source of momentum to keep the efforts alive, so that people stay involved in the work as long as necessary to effect a positive change and provide a quality coherent education for all students.

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In addition, the following individuals were interviewed: Jackie Decote (Public Affairs Research Council), Michael Hollier and Rodney Watson (LDE), Nancy Jolly and George Silbernagel (Louisiana legislative staff), Faimon Roberts (LaSIP).

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SEDL

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh Street
Austin, Texas 78701
(512) 476-6861